

AERC National Championship 2006 preview

An introduction to the historic, beautiful trail which will be the site for this year's championship rides

This year, October in Virginia will lend itself to more than just the brilliant fall foliage on the Blue Ridge and the welcoming of the thousands of tourists who come to experience the Southern charm and scenic beauty in the birthplace of America. This October in Virginia will also herald the 2006 AERC National Endurance Championship rides in the Massanutten Mountains of Fort Valley, Virginia, home of the famous Old Dominion endurance ride.

For the competitors who qualify, the opportunity to ride the majority, and arguably the best, of the Old Dominion trails during the national championship is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Fort Valley is a unique geological feature—a natural fortress comprising a 23-mile long, five-mile wide valley of rich grazing lands and hardwood forest. The valley is completely encircled by the Massanutten Mountains which are part of the George Washington National Forest.

Within this peaceful enclave is a vast network of horse farms with many trails crisscrossing the valley. Only four roads access Fort Valley—a very narrow entrance to the north that follows the swiftly running Passage Creek, and three roads in the south, two of which crest the summits through

natural gaps.

The 50- and 100-mile trail will begin in the southern end of the valley, and traverse the crest of the western ridge, heading north before crossing the valley floor to surmount the eastern ridge heading south. The trail is not only abundant in breathtaking vistas from atop the Massanutten Mountains with the Shenandoah River gently winding on the valley floor far below, but also traverses every phase of our nation's history: from ancient Indian byways winding up and along the Massanutten ridges, to colonial roads made by General Washington's troops as a final desperate escape route for his army during the darkest days of the American Revolution, to Civil War-era paths used by General Stonewall Jackson's troops during their "lightning raids" on the Federal troops in 1862 and 1864.



Unparalleled views from overlooking Fort Valley, Virginia, site of the 2006 AERC National Championship Ride. Photo: Flora Hillman.

Choosing the trails

The strategic choice of selecting the best part of the OD trail to present the challenge expected to a national championship ride fell to the capable hands of ride manager Bob Walsh and trail manager John Proudman. A longtime OD member, and current vice president of the Old Dominion Endurance Ride, Inc., Walsh has a deep appreciation of and respect for the OD trail. However, measuring the success of a trail comes about more by popular demand than anything else. "When the 50 mile championship trail was ridden as the trail for the 2005 Fort Valley 30/30/50/50 we put out the word that we'd like comments back," Walsh said. "What we received was an excellent response—rave reviews from riders who told us how much they enjoyed the trail. The most favored comments were the nice breaks [along the trail] to allow horses to move along on, with a nice variety of mountain trails and lowland roads."

A veteran endurance rider of almost two decades, Walsh sees the most important aspect of his job as achieving the best use of the trail by laying out a challenging course that requires strategy rather than just a flat-out run. "It will be a technical ride," Walsh commented, noting that the trail will not unduly favor one type of horse over another.

"There isn't a bit of this trail that I haven't ridden in one way, shape or form,"

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Walsh explains, focusing on his key goal of providing the utmost safety for the horses and riders. "Because of the time of year, riders will be in the dark at the beginning and the end. We've put in as much open terrain as possible, both on the front end of the ride and the final trail."

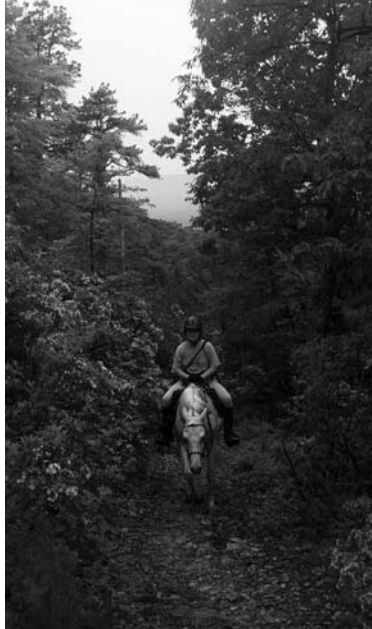
Designing the trail to challenge during the daylight hours will have some delightful perks for most competitors. "Riders will have the pleasure of actually seeing the famous Sherman's Gap in the daylight," Walsh quipped with a chuckle. "Most riders in the OD only ever see that trail in the dark."

Gravel roads and wide trail, both immediately accessible by vehicles, are earmarked for the start and finish, providing a further measure of safety for ride management to easily and efficiently monitor riders and trail markings. "Ride management will police the trails with ATVs in the dark," Walsh said, "to ensure that riders are OK and still on trail."

A worthy base camp

Fort Valley Stable, at the southernmost end of the valley, will be base camp for the championship rides. Owners Sandy and Rick Deschenes moved to the valley over a decade ago, enraptured by the scenic mountain trails. Upon purchasing the Fort Valley Stable, Sandy and Rick turned their riding hobby into a full-time business. The stables offer trailer and camper parking with permanent individual pipe corrals for each site.

Rental horses are available for those who don't bring a horse but wish to enjoy a day's ride. A variety of guided riding experiences are offered, from easy one-hour rides to a full-day guided trail ride package. For the non-competitor there is a series of wooded trails on camp property that offers one or more hours of easy riding. Most of this trail is rolling terrain with no hard climbs. The trails are well marked with paint blazed on the trees, and a color coordinated map is provided for the ease of finding your way back in time for dinner. For family and friends of the AERC championship riders, renting a horse is a lovely way for them to enjoy some of the same beautiful trail



The Old Dominion trails chosen for the national championship will be both challenging and beautiful. Photo: Flora Hillman.

without having to do much except climb in the saddle . . . and enjoy the scenery.

Special ride perks

At the ride site there will be a vendor area, and speakers are being lined up with lectures and demonstrations of interest to the endurance rider's heart. Meals will be catered, including breakfast under the main tent where all the meeting and lectures will take place. Vetting will be held just a short stroll down the road at the lovely farm of Norman and Becky Brouchard right at the finish line.

"The amenities of this locale are prefect," promises Walsh, noting that the Brouchards' beautiful fields with stunning mountain views will allow the competitors to relax and rest before going the quarter-mile back to base camp.

"This will be event to be remembered for a long time," assured Walsh. Incredible history, spectacular scenery, the famous Old Dominion trail, and unparalleled Virginia hospitality await the riders and crews of the 2006 AERC National Endurance Championships. So, mark your calendars for October 20-23 and come enjoy the brilliant autumn glory of Virginia's historic Shenandoah Valley.

For further information, visit the AERC National Championship website at www.olddominionrides.org. Fort Valley Stable: www.fortvalleystable.com.

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